



THRILL

by Saadi A. Simawe (Iraq)

At dawn, while still half-asleep, I heard, as if in a dream, my mother tell my father, "And they had to take her to the doctor . . ."

"And what did the doctor say?"

"He took a piece from her infected foot and said they were sending it to the big hospital in Baghdad."

"Ah?"

Without lifting the covers off my face, I tried to figure out whom they were talking about. But the silence was prolonged; and I became impatient, hearing only the noise of my father's false teeth mixed with the glassy noises of the cups which my mother was rinsing.

"And what did her mother say?" asked my father, munching.

"She's wailing all the time . . . She's really scared."

"Oh, no. That's not good news. It's probably cancer," he said after a moment.

"It must be the evil eye. Poor girl. She just graduated. The entire family has been waiting for her for years."

"It's probably just a cut," my father said while sipping his hot tea.

"I hope so."

Heavy silence fell. The longer the silence continued the more I tended to believe it was a serious case. It must be cancer. And this would mean she'll die soon; it's only a matter of days. How ironic. How many years had my aunt been waiting for her to graduate and help support the family? More than fifteen years. And now only a week after her graduation she is dying. I imagined the tragedy. I could not resist the thrill of seeing in my mind what my aunt would do if her only daughter, whom she had counted on all these years, and who finally graduated last year after all her sons had failed in school, died? What would Ahmed do? What would Jassim do?

Removing the covers off my face, I said, "Good morning," and rubbed my eyes as if I had just woke up.

"Good morning."

The heavy, mournful silence continued.

"What's up, Mother? What's wrong with Hamdia?" I asked, unable to wait any longer.

She told me the story from the beginning: How it was a minor cut, how she hadn't taken care of it, and how it was infected and spread like horror all over the foot.

I had my breakfast in a hurry and rushed to my aunt's place.

The house felt like a funeral home. The faces were gloomy and sullen. I sat silently, not daring to greet or look at anyone's face. Hamdia was in bed. Around her on the floor sat my aunt, her daughter-in-law, and another woman from the neighborhood. After a long while, when I sensed the women's faces becoming aware of my existence, I whispered, "How is Hamdia, Aunt?"

My aunt suddenly opened her wet, weary eyes and lifted her head from her knee, as if she couldn't remember who I was. "Oh, my boy. I'm scared. I don't know what I'm going to do. It's just my luck."

"I hope everything will be all right."

"No, my nephew. It's serious. It's serious."

I tried my best to look worried. But all the time I was aware of inappropriate feelings that kept mocking my worried face and voice. In an attempt to hide those feelings, I said,

"Did you take her to the doctor?"

My aunt adjusted her sitting position, unlocked her hands around her knees, and said,

"When the doctor saw her foot he was stunned. He cut this much flesh from her foot. He said he should send it to the big hospital in Baghdad."

"Well . . . How many days are we supposed to wait for the results?"

"At least ten."

I lit a cigarette. And it struck me that I would like to take the referral and the sample to Baghdad. I wanted to know the results as soon as possible. I didn't know why I was inclined to believe it was cancer. And I was so eager to hear that from the doctor. What would happen when I brought back the bad news to my aunt?

"But this is a long time. Ten days?" I asked.

And immediately my aunt, as if she had read my mind, jumped at the idea. "Nephew, are you going to Baghdad this week?"

"Yes. And I can leave today."

"Great. Ahmed is coming soon with the referral from the hospital. And you can take it to Baghdad."

The fact that only the hopeless cases in our town are usually sent to Baghdad scared my aunt who started swinging her head and moaning in the traditional wailing over the dead.

"Oh, my God. This disease spreads so fast. What am I going to do?"

A thrill spread all over me. And I said, while controlling my trembling voice, "No, Aunt. God forbid. Nothing bad will happen."

While still keening, my aunt said, "No, my boy. That's it. As I told you. That's it."

And she crawled toward me, staring at me through her tears, and whispered, as if she did not want to hear her own voice, "Her entire foot is swollen and festering. Is that a minor cut?"

"Don't talk that way, Aunt. That disease is not like what you said."

Changing her sobbing tone to an entreating one, she said, "Nephew, please phone us as soon as you know the results from the doctor."

And sobbing again, she whispered, while moving toward me, "If I just know it's not cancer."

The door was opened and Ahmed in his work uniform came in. My aunt rushed to tell him, "Muhsen is going to Baghdad."

"Do you know where el-Jumhuria Hospital is?" asked Ahmed, while his eyes shone with seriousness and apprehension.

"Sure," I said.

"The doctor says this referral is for the cancer lab."

I took the referral from him and said, "Okay," and pretended to be reading to hide my rising excitement.

Then he said, "This is the bottle with the sample. Don't open it."

I stood up to leave. But he said, "Try to tell the doctor this is urgent. And immediately phone us when you have the results."

"Sure."

And when I was on my way out, he added, "Brother, I'm relying on you," with pleading that embarrassed me, as if Hamdia's life were in my hands.

Once I was out, I felt released and free. I had been all the time repressing and hiding my feelings, with great effort putting on a worried countenance and pretending a sad voice.

I arrived in Baghdad about 2:15 p.m., a half an hour after the hospital's office hours.

So I decided to go to my brother's house. On the way, while I was carrying the referral and the bottle of Hamdia's flesh, I was thrilled thinking of how I was going to relate the story to my brother and his wife. I imagined their fear and dread. Their house would immediately be charged with unusual, scared emotions; and their minds would automatically see the death of Hamdia and its impact on my aunt.

It was about 2:30 now, and my brother would be home soon. I pressed the bell and my sister-in-law opened the door. When I greeted her, my voice, against my will, sounded so ominous and my face looked so sullen that she stared at me with panic and asked, "What's wrong? Is everything okay?" She followed me into the living room with questioning eyes.

After a moment of silence, I found my voice, which started to quiver. "I've just come from el-Diwaniyah."

"Yes?"

I paced in the living room, feeling her paleness and fright. Then I said gravely, "Is Mahmoud here?"

"He'll be here any minute. Tell me, what's going on?"

I collapsed on the sofa, panting. "Poor Hamdia. I don't know what's wrong with her."

"What happened?" she asked, putting her hand on her chest, expecting more shocking news from me.

"Her entire leg is paralyzed. The doctor believes it's cancer. He opened her foot and took out some flesh. It's in this bottle. I'm going to take it to el-Jumhuria Hospital for tests tomorrow."

"How about her? How is she doing?"

"She's a goner. My aunt is weeping day and night. All of them are really frightened. Even she believes she is dying soon."

I sat on the edge of the couch and loosened the upper buttons of my shirt as I said,

"I'm really frightened. I think it's cancer."

"God forbid. It's the evil eye. Poor girl. She just graduated. May God punish those women's evil eyes. They only have their own eyes on people." And she went into the kitchen.

Alone in the living room, I was anxiously waiting for my brother. I heard my sister-in-law incredulously ask while coming back from the kitchen, "When did this happen? How many days ago?"

"Two weeks ago. She cut her foot. Then the cut started to expand and expand and fester."

She looked in my eyes with horror, as if she had suddenly become paralyzed by the presence of death. "Your aunt would kill herself. She would die with her."

"My aunt is a goner, too. Weeping all the time. Now they want to know the results immediately."

"Yes. Because — God forbid — this cancer kills before you know it. How long will the diagnosis take?"

"I don't know. This is why I came."

I left my sister-in-law in the living room in the midst of death and mourning. In a darker room upstairs, I changed my clothes and lay down on the bed feeling content with what I had done and said . . . Then I thought of her. I wanted to be worried but just couldn't. I was frightened by the fact that I was not frightened by her imminent death. And I thought I ought to be worried about her. Would I be able to cry about her death tomorrow or after tomorrow?

The bell rang, finally. It was my brother. I rushed and opened the door for him. I greeted him solemnly with a voice that involuntarily became grave and ominous. I followed him into the living room. His wife was standing by the kitchen holding an onion and a knife, more anxious than I was to tell him the story. And as I expected, she said, "Oh . . . let

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Muhsen tell you about Hamdia?"

"What happened to her?" my brother asked, questioning his wife's face and mine.

"Very sick," I said, resisting a surge of excitement.

"Is that all?" he said, irritated.

"No, she was in the hospital, had an operation and the doctors don't know what it is."

"So? What is it? How did it happen? Is it serious?"

"Yes. I just came from el-Diwaniyah for her sake."

"And now she is here, in el-Jumhuria Hospital?"

"No. The doctor took out flesh from her infected foot and sent it with me for diagnosis."

"What's that? So instantaneous?" He collapsed on the couch, staring beyond my face. I went on:

"She was cut about two weeks ago. The cut was infected or something and then it started to spread all over her foot. The entire leg is now paralyzed. My aunt is weeping day and night. So are Ahmed, Jassim and the entire family."

"What does the doctor think?"

"He believes it's cancer."

"Ugh! !"

"Can we find out a little earlier?"

"Yes."

His wife was still standing at the kitchen door, looking alternately at our faces.

"Can I see the referral?"

I jumped and got it. "This is the referral and this is the flesh sample in the bottle."

He read the referral, but did not understand. Then he examined the bottle with fear

and disgust. "Why didn't you send it to the hospital?"

"I missed the office hours."

"Okay. Tomorrow, early in the morning, I will tell my supervisor that I have an

emergency situation and come with you to the hospital."

He went to the bedroom, changed his clothes, and within a minute came back saying, "What will my aunt do? This is going to be horrible. She'll kill herself. All those years of waiting."

"She just cries all the time. All of them are scared."

He touched his mustache, thinking, "But she just graduated."

Looking into his white, long face, I shook my head and said, "What a tragedy, if she died."

He gave me an admonishing look, and went on patting nervously his mustache.

Thrilled by the fact that we both were seeing her tragic death in our minds, I tried to sway him to talk about her death and its impact on my aunt. "What a tragedy . . ."

"Don't talk like that."

Silence fell. But I went on imagining that she had died. What would my aunt do, what would her sons, our relatives, and friends do? And I felt so anxious to hear the results from the doctor. How would my brother and his wife react to it? They would go to el-Diwaniyah for the funeral, and our relatives would come from el-Nasiriah and el-Basrah. There would be a very dramatic scene. I imagined the mourning faces of the men in front of the house and the wailing women inside.

Early in the morning, after listening to my brother's advice and directions, I went to the el-Jumhuria Hospital and waited for him at the main door among the crowd of patients and visitors. And after about half an hour, I saw him coming, taller than most people, so worried and immersed in the situation that the same wave of excitement flowed through me and scared me. I managed to hide it under a worried face before he joined me and said, avoiding to meet my eyes, "Well, let's go."

"Okay."

After a long search in the labyrinth of the huge hospital, we got to the Department of

the Chemical Diagnosis. We walked into the half-dark, very quiet, damp hall which was marbly clean and tidy. And while we were walking so quietly as if we were scared to hear our own footsteps, we read Department of Cancerous Diseases, Cancer Laboratory, Radio-logical Diagnosis . . . and I felt that there was no doubt that she had cancer.

We walked into the Cancer Laboratory. It was a big office full of many kinds of neat machines at which several doctors in their white uniforms were ghostly working. We approached one of them, who was thin, white, and very clean. My brother said, so politely, almost pleadingly, "Is this for you, doctor?" and he showed him the referral.

The doctor took the referral and read. I examined his very clean round face to make sure that he was a human. Then he looked at my brother and asked, "Where is the bottle?"

So this is the doctor who is going to know for sure, I thought, and whispered to my brother, "Ask him about how long it will take. Her family is really worried."

My brother looked at me, irritated, as if he were telling me, "Patience." Then he said to the doctor, "When are we supposed to know the results, doctor?"

"In a week."

My brother and I looked at each other with disbelief. And we said almost together beseechingly, "One week is too long, doctor. We have come from the South, and her family is really worried. Can we find out a little earlier?"

"Well, it depends on the machines. We cannot go any faster. Also, there are many cases before hers."

Silence fell, and the doctor waited for us to leave. But when he saw our entreating eyes, he said, "Well, try to come after five days."

"Thank you, doctor. We appreciate that. That means next Saturday?" We responded together, with great gratitude.

"Aha."

On the way out, my brother, who was now far more excited about the situation than I,

said, "We have to call them. They have to wait for five days."

"Yes, they have to."

On Saturday, we came back to the hospital. We saw the same doctor, who apparently did not remember us. When my brother reminded him, he moved to one of the machines. My heart started to beat violently. "Now we're going to know," I thought anxiously. The doctor moved away from the machine and went into a small office at the corner of the laboratory. He stayed there for a few, very long moments, and came back to us carrying some papers. He gave them to my brother and turned to go back to his office. But my brother asked, "What are the results, doctor?"

"Her doctor will tell you about it."

"Can you tell us about it now? We want to call her family."

He came back, took the papers from my brother, and said, "It's just a skin infection . . . not a serious thing."

My brother's face beamed with great relief. "I thank you very much, doctor." And he walked out of the hall, excited, in a hurry. I followed him silently. I tried my best to look excited in case he looked back at me. I was appalled by my disappointment and abrupt turnoff. Why did I feel, when I heard the results from the doctor, as though I was betrayed, as though I was cheated out of something exciting I had been waiting for, a promising opportunity that was foiled at the moment I got to . . . Downcast, I was thinking while dragging my feet behind my brother who was almost running. I heard him say, "This is great. Now we're relieved."

"Oh, yes."

"She's really a poor thing. She doesn't deserve that. She's still young and she just graduated."

I could not find anything to say. But I tried to say something that might express some

kind of excitement of relief. I was furious. I could not feel anything but my complete disappointment. I heard, as if from afar, my brother say, while he rushed into el-Rashid Street, "Hey, hurry up. Let's phone them right now."

I couldn't even find the strength to follow him. I was walking after him without any real motive, and I wished I were, at that moment, lying in my bed in my half-dark room. I even tried to tell him that I didn't feel well and needed to go home, but I was too scared. And I followed him into the crowded street, feeling that the problem did not concern me any more.

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